DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 857 RC 015 504

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TITLE The Family Partnership on the Ranch.
PUB DATE Jul 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Family and Community History (Albuquerque, NM, July 14-17, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; Family Life; *Family Structure; Farmers; *Farm Management; *Females; Interpersonal Competence; Nuclear Family; *Rural Family; *Sex Role; Social History; Social Networks; Social Responsibility; Spouses; Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Ranching; *Social Roles; United States (West)

ABSTRACT

This paper contends that women are as vital as men to the functioning of western ranches where cattle raising--or cattle culture--is central to the social system. The self-sufficient nuclear family is also emphasized, and a ranch couple is described as a business as well as a domestic partnership. Ranch women have four roles: rearing children, teaching ranch skills, and ensuring family continuation; raising cattle by participating as full cowhand and as ranch accountant, coordinator, and administrator; maintaining social relationships and cooperation among family and neighbors through hospitality; and representing the ranch and family in business and social matters where performance reflects on the family. Early Spanish and Mexican culture--in which women owned property, made contracts, and held community property--influenced the development of an active role for women in cattle culture. Each generation has adapted this role to its needs, resulting in the present definition of a ranch family as a partnership and of women's role as an integration of economic and social function, of instrumental purpose and symbolic expression. (LFL)

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THE FAMILY PARTNERSHIP ON THE RANCH

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Conference on Family and Community History
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July 14-17, 1983

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THE FAMILY PARTNERSHIP ON THE RANCH

The raising of cattle in the United States is associated in the popular mind with the cowboy, the horseman-wage earner who became the American folk hero when the frontier was settled and nineteenth century ways of life were transformed by the twentieth century. However, the Romantic Period of the cowboy, the cowboy frontier, when cattle were herded on the open range by groups of men known as cowboys or cowhands, covered a brief 20-30 years. With fencing, railroads, windmills, came settlement of the West, and this meant families arrived to stay. The open range and the giant ranches were modified by settlers who established the family ranch and the family on the ranch.

Certainly cowboys are still punching cows in 1983, and many are young and unmarried, but the family is the dominant form of social life on ranches throughout the West. Today ranching reflects the complexities found in other occupations: changes brought about by technology, mobility, economics, education. In spite of these changes, however, cattle raising people continue to function as more than an occupational or a business group because they share a set of values, a world view, and a social system as well as an occupation. Therefore, I speak of the group as cattle culture because while the raising of cattle is central to the life of the group, this central purpose is embedded in a social system.

The central purpose, this occupation, has evolved into a culture distinct from the rest of American society for two reasons: 1) that cattle raising has been until very recently a full time enterprise for those actually engaged in it, and 2) that the entire family is involved in the enterprise.

The full time nature of raising cattle means that life is governed by animals and nature even in an age dominated by technology. Certainly there is a sophisticated economic marketplace to worry about, and certainly there are scientific and technological adaptations incorporated into it. But those who are actually raising animals do not work in a factory, take scheduled vacations, or have a predictable income, and they must still worry about the weather, fertility, and other forces of nature. To an extent then, cattle raising maintains some continuities with pre-industrial forms of social life.

Of particular relevance is the family in this complex activity for the ranch family is not simply the means for producing a new generation of cowboys. The ranch family is actually the economic unit as well as the unit of marriage and kinship, and *women are as vital to the functioning of the ranch as men.* Because the role of women is so vital to the ranch venture the ranch couple can be characterized as a partnership in an undertaking that does not separate business from domestic life, but in which the two are integrated.

This arrangement does not ensure equality between the partners, and it does not always run smoothly, but the ranch family and the family ranch depend on both partners, male and female, for success in raising cattle and in rearing the next generation.

I want to focus attention on the woman's role in the family since it is not widely recognized or understood. The female role can be described as having four spheres, any one of which may be more dominant than another, depending on the individual woman and the point where she is in the life cycle. The spheres overlap each other as well, again depending on the

individual woman and family.

I have labeled these: 1) production--that is, raising of cattle; 2) reproduction--rearing of children and ensuring the continuation of the family; 3) hospitality--maintaining social relations through the domestic sphere; and 4) representation--acting for the family through relations with the public.

These spheres of activity have evolved over time and have their roots in a number of sources, but certainly we can note the importance of early Spanish and Mexican culture which established not only the ranch as an institution in the United States but many of the social forms that accompany it, and the Anglo frontier which situated the two cultures in the same space in the Southwest, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona especially.

Of considerable importance is the fact that in Spanish colonies women could own property, make contracts, and had community property rights. They, therefore, owned land, obtained land grants, inherited land, and wives shared equally with husbands in the ownership of the family estate. Today, those states that were originally Spanish colonies and retained portions of the Spanish legal system are known as community property states in contrast to those states that were originally governed by English common law in which wives do not have separate ownership in the family estate and are not recognized as separate individuals from their husbands. When they become widows, they must pay inheritance tax on their own property since they are not recognized as a partner, an individual independent of the husband.

The social and legal independence afforded New Mexico women by the Spanish system during the years 1821-1846 has been documented and discussed

by Janet Lecompte in her article, "The Independent Women of Hispanic New Mexico." It seems plausible that this Spanish legal system may be responsible to some degree for the active role women have exerted in cattle culture since large scale ranching was first established in the Spanish colonies.

Throughout the Southwest and the West women have assumed strong and active roles where cattle are raised. Some women of the West developed glamorous careers as outlaws, rodeo performers, or elegant patronesses of range life. All too often these are the only women whose stories have been recorded in the history books, but we are now learning from female historians and writers that there were many women who operated ranches or who took on major responsibilities in the family ranch. Just a few names from the growing number that are being identified include: Granny Jeffers who was raised in New Mexico and ranched with her husband in Arizona. Rosa Katherine "Grandma" Hilton who ranched in New Mexico near Las Vegas, early nineteenth century ranchwoman, Maria del Carmen Calvillo Delgado, of San Antonio, and more recently, Agnes Morley Cleaveland of New Mexico and at the present time, Fern Sawyer who ranches near Nogal, New Mexico.

Some of the early ranchwomen came West with their husbands and learned ranching as young wives, occasionally as young widows, while others had more unusual stories. Nadine Parmer was a young piano teacher from the East who traveled West as companion to an older woman and within a few years she became a cattle baroness in her own right. Ranchwomen of the twentieth century have often spent their girlhood working cattle on the family ranch. Fern Sawyer explains that she was on a horse from morning till night as she grew up, working with her daddy who taught her the

cattle business. Agnes Morley Cleaveland describes her girlhood in her book, *No Life for a Lady*, as follows: "Cattle became the circumference of our universe and their behavior absorbed our entire waking hours" (p. 104).

Young women today are finding more paying jobs in ranch life and animal related occupations. They are hired to train and care for cutting horses, racing horses, and on ranches. At Ruidoso Downs, for example, young women as well as young men work in the stables, and some women are also successful as jockeys.

There is such variation in these stories that it may appear to be an exercise in futility to search for something called a woman's role. Yet I would argue that there is in fact a pattern to ranch life outlining the responsibilities and potentials for women in cattle culture, and this pattern clusters around the four spheres I mentioned earlier and has evolved out of the complex history of ranching.

All of these four spheres: production, reproduction, hospitality, and representation derive from the structure of the family: 1) the emphasis on the nuclear family as a self-sufficient unit, and 2) the partnership nature of the wife/husband relationship. The ranch family, like many other American families, is defined as the nuclear family: wife, husband, children. While some individuals receive financial help from parents when they first become engaged in their own ranching ventures, each family is expected to be financially independent, even though there may be a family ranch to be inherited in the future. Unlike many other American traditional families, however, the wife is a full participant in the business of ranching, although she may not be recognized as such, either by herself or others. This participation qualifies her as a partner in the family enterprise.

Of the four spheres of women's roles, reproduction is of prime importance during the years when a family is young. The woman has the major responsibility for the reproduction of children and the family, the domestic sphere. More than simply bearing and caring for children, however, women are expected to instill the values of cattle culture in the children from birth, to launch their training very early, and to support and supervise their activities associated with cattle culture as they grow up, such as the 4-H club, County Fairs, rodeo and other youth activities. Reproduction, then, refers to the reproduction of the culture through the family, as well as to babies.

Partnership functions in this domain of family life as well as others. Males spend considerable time with babies and young children and certainly with older children as they become capable of assuming responsibility. Children are taught "to help" very early--around the barns, with the livestock, and general upkeep, and men take an active role in teaching them to carry out chores, ride a horse, and respect their elders, especially their female elders.

Shifting to the domain of production--to the raising of cattle, the wife's responsibilities vary here, depending on whether or not there are young children, but she shoulders a range of tasks associated with cattle raising. Many ranchwomen are fully engaged in all of the work of cattle raising while others are selectively involved. For example, they may participate in the daily care of livestock near the ranchhouse and they may participate in the hardest work as a full cowhand during calving, animal sickness, round-up and other intensive work periods. Additionally, and very importantly, women often keep the accounts, handling the paper

work for the family business for many of them may have been formally trained and employed as bookkeepers.

Certainly all women function as administrators and coordinators of the ranch. The telephone is a strong link between the ranch and the rest of the world, and the ranchwoman in the house must handle all calls effectively as well as any persons who drop in to do business such as oil company representatives or neighbors. Additionally, she must be available to drive into town or to deliver needed items to another location. These responsibilities may seem secondary to outsiders, but in fact they are essential to the success of the ranch. Although "Papa may get the credit for the decisions, the mama prepares the information base needed to make the decision," as John Bennett has pointed out. More and more women are making decisions or actively participating in the decision-making process with the men today. This cluster of skills, demands, and abilities, define the women's role firmly as that of partner through the process of production.

The remaining two spheres, hospitality and representation, concern the women's role in social relations. Although cattle raising may appear to be a very self-contained endeavor, especially if one believes in the myth of individualism, in fact, ranching involves intense social cooperation as well as a competitive spirit. Scholars such as Mody Boatright and John Bennett have stressed the importance of cooperation among family and neighbors, and in my own work I have found that being a good neighbor is among the most important of all values in cattle culture. Much of this cooperation is visible among males, but females are equally important and often more important in maintaining social relations through hospitality.

The serving of food and drink, whether it be a feast at a round-up or ice water on a hot day, takes on ritual significance. More than simply food and drink, the ranchwoman maintains a hospitable and friendly, cooperative atmosphere that solidifies or weakens the social ties with friends and neighbors, and equally significant, with members of the extended family, hers or her husband's.

In a more public sphere women are perceived as representative of the family--when they conduct business or deal with strangers, hold membership in church or other organizations, compete in horse shows, rodeos and other public events, they represent the family, the ranch and perhaps a long tradition, but certainly they appear in public with the family name and are known as the wife or daughter of some individual. This function can be a confining one in a family where the male exercises all authority and the females are submissive. Alternatively, in a family where the partnership operates with reciprocity and mutual respect, the representative sphere can be powerful. This representational function applies equally to daughters who may be very active publicly when they are preadolescent and adolescent and may have a close relationship to their fathers, or daddies as they are called, during this time. This does not preclude their having a close relationship with the mother, however.

Although I have only briefly mentioned the representative expressions, these should be noted with special attention, for in this sphere behavior takes on heightened symbolic meaning. Not only in the arena of the rodeo or the calf show, but in the public arena relating to legal matters or rites of passage such as weddings and funerals, women act for the family, and their performance is evaluated in these terms and reflects on the family.

For these as well as other reasons, this category of behavior can lead to conflict as well as to unity in social relations. And it is for this reason that this sphere of the women's role contains somewhat more potential for the exercise of power and authority than the other spheres which also have this potential.

All of these spheres of ranchwomen's role have evolved out of historical conditions and adapted to the needs of each generation of ranch families. Any and all of these spheres of the role can overlap each other in a given day in the life of a ranchwoman, and any sphere can be the focus of emphasis in a particular family. Very few ranch families do not utilize these spheres to some degree at different stages of the life cycle. Together they contribute to the definition of the ranch family as a partnership and of women's role as an integration of economic and social function, of instrumental purpose and symbolic expression.